

# CHAPTER ONE:

## THE EARLY YEARS

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When Lieutenant John Shortland discovered the mouth of the Hunter River and established a convict settlement on the south shore in 1797, he also visited the northern shore of the harbour. At the time of his visit there were members of the Worimi aboriginal people encamped on the beach on the Stockton peninsula near what we know today as Lynn Oval. The tribal lands of the Worimi stretched from Stockton to Port Stephens, and this area was known to them as Burrinbington. There was bush tucker in abundance and the waters and littoral zone teemed with seafood of all kinds. Their occupancy of the area went back thousands of years, and over those years the local indigenous people had built up huge shell middens. Early settlers used the shells as a ready resource for their lime kilns, and remains of middens can still be found today along Stockton beach. Doubtless there were aboriginal people living on the southern shore where Newcastle is now as well, but our history has little to say about what happened to the original inhabitants of either shore, though remnant groups of the Worimi could be found on Stockton Beach as late as 1870. Being a resourceful maritime people they were at home on the water in their dugout canoes, and could be said to be the first to carry goods from one side of the harbour to the other.



Pic: Bottomley

*Plaque near Punt Rd commemorating Lieutenant John Shortland's visit to Stockton in 1797*

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Pic: Bottomley

*Punt Road in 2007*

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By roughly the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mainly flat arable land of Burrinbingon had attracted a considerable number of settlers. (I've been unable to find any accounts of what was involved in the wresting of this land from the indigenous owners by the settlers, but that's not unusual. By the 1860s and 70s mention of aboriginal people had pretty well disappeared from white fella historical records. Apart from scattered references, aborigines had become pretty much invisible and their presence largely unacknowledged).

The biggest drawback with this new and fertile area for the new settlers was its remoteness from any large settlements and the lack of transport facilities. To get their produce to the nearest big markets at Newcastle, settlers had to go the long way round by horse and cart via Fullerton Cove and the punt at Hexham. The only way for people to get across the harbour to Newcastle in mid-century was by a passenger rowing boat service. From the 1840s most of the supplies needed to keep Stockton going were still coming across the harbour in rowing boats. One of the stories from that time is that the beer kegs were lashed together and floated/towed across, (which prompts the question: does a keg full of beer float, or did they only tow the empties?). The first passenger rowboat service to be licensed was operated by Hugh Boyce. It began in 1853 and by 1855 he had been joined by two other licensed ferrymen, Thomas Goodall and John Rinker. The ferrying business stayed confined to rowing boats for quite a few years, and people with heavy loads and produce still had to make the long journey around through Hexham.

Industry in the Stockton Peninsula had gone ahead apace in the first half of the nineteenth century. By mid-century there had been a salt works, an engine works, chemical plants, an iron foundry, not to mention a tweed mill which employed some 300 people till it burned down in 1851 – (by which time it was said to be the biggest factory in the colony). But by the latter half of the century most of these early enterprises had gone, and Stockton was dominated by shipyards, timber mills, and the shops that supplied the needs of the settlers on the north side of the harbour. Stockton didn't really begin to take off as a residential suburb until the State government subdivided a large area of land north of Clyde Street into small blocks in 1887.

It wasn't until 1869 that Hugh Boyce and his son bought a small paddlewheeler called the Lady Belmore to improve on the rowing boat, and after that he had the Saucy Jack built at Callen's slipway and added it to the service in 1878. These were steam ferries and were initially operated by a company called Callen and Boyce, but the Callens soon dropped out of the partnership. Fares were 6d per crossing and a shilling after 8pm.

The need for trans-harbour transport continued to expand, and in 1882 Hugh Boyce added Bluebell I to his fleet, and then the Adeline in 1883. Stockton was situated on a working harbour and there were all sorts of craft scooting around, but the need for something to ferry heavy loads, produce and other merchandise was becoming more and more urgent.

Despite the fact that Boyce's ferries were meant to carry passengers, soon after the service began it became the custom to load produce and all sorts of other merchandise onto their decks. But as the years went by, the growing use of the ferries for transportation of cargo as well as people was becoming a considerable nuisance to people getting on and off, not to mention the trouble and time taken to load and unload the cargo. What's more, if you took the stuff via Fullerton Cove you still had to take the ferry across the Hunter at Hexham. How much easier and quicker it would be, they must have thought, to ferry it across direct from Stockton.

As usual with such matters, things were left to worsen until the situation became pretty much intolerable. It took till 1886 (Ross Craig gives 1889) for something to



Map ex Forestry Commission of NSW, 1986

*Map of Newcastle, Stockton and environs, showing the long journey to Newcastle from the Stockton Peninsula via Fullerton Cove and Hexham.*

be done, when the Callen brothers built a cargo punt at their slipway at Stockton, and it began to ply between Stockton and Newcastle several times daily. It was a flat-topped barge affair that was towed by a tug. It was built specifically as a cargo punt, and designed to carry heavy loads, (though pedestrians and others soon began to use it as well). It had a derrick and winch to facilitate loading and unloading, since it was big enough to carry heavily-laden vehicles. (At no stage in my research have I come across the mention of a name for the cargo punt. It appears to have been known almost universally as just 'Callen's horse punt', as horses, carts and drays made up the bulk of its traffic).

The Callen brothers were major players in the growth of Stockton. They owned one of the biggest shipyards, which built a wide range of vessels like tugs, lighters and ferries, as well as constructing sea walls, wharves and bridges. They provided lighterage services for the harbour, and also disposed of Mayfield's nightsoil by towing it out to sea on barges, and they had their own big timber yard, steam sawmill, joinery and slipway. In 1895 the partnership between the Callen brothers split up and Peter Callen went out on his own with his son. (Jean Purtell gives this date as 1890). After he had built the wharf for the newly-opened colliery he set up a new slipway near the present-day 16-footer club while the other brothers set up another shipyard and slip at North Stockton, opposite the Seamen's Mission near what is now The Boatrowers Hotel. Peter Callen & Sons Ltd retained the ownership of the cargo punt.

The new punt was an immediate hit with the farmers, who found it to be a huge improvement on the old route. It left the northern shore from a wharf at the south west point of the Stockton peninsula (adjacent to present-day Punt Road) and went across to another wharf on the Newcastle side on Wharf Rd near Perkins Street. Getting your produce to the markets early gave you a headstart, so it wasn't unusual to see the farmers arriving at the dock in the early hours of the morning to try to be among the first on the punt, because it only took a few sulkies and drays. It got to the stage where Peter Callen decided to build some crude sleeping arrangements for the farmers near to the wharf so they could have a kip while they were waiting to board the punt. These soon became known as "Cockies' Roosts" in the local argot. According to Ross Craig they slept on the timber racks in the nearby timber mill, and it is not really clear whether Callen actually built anything with the cockies specially in mind or whether they just took advantage of the timber racks when they could.



Stockton Hist Soc Jnl Pic

*Peter Callen. He died in 1928 aged 80 and his shipyard was closed.*

In an interview with the RTA, Pat Conway had this to say: *Callan's had a barge – it was just a flat-top – and tugs used to bring it across. They'd make it fast, and the tug would go astern and turn around and get in place alongside it, then they'd go to Newcastle where they'd do the same thing. They used to go around to Merewether St on the Newcastle side – that's going around into The Basin.*

As we've seen, the Callens, and especially Peter Callen, loomed large in the affairs of Stockton, and there must have been a certain amount of resentment simmering as a result of their success in their various enterprises, because some six months after the cargo punt service began operating, on December 16<sup>th</sup> 1886 the Newcastle Morning Herald ran an account of "A dastardly



Pic: Bottomley

*The Boatrowers Hotel in 2008*

and despicable act”. Sometime in the early hours of the day before, someone had cast adrift the cargo punt and the passenger ferry Ethel and they were found the next morning drifting in the harbour. The Callens were nonplussed, and put the incident down to “malevolence”. They offered a fifty pound reward for information about the dastardly deed but there is no mention of anyone being charged over the matter. (It does give a new meaning to the phrase “Taking a punt”, though).

Things chugged along pretty uneventfully for another ten years, but come the turn of the new century Peter Callen found that the demands of the cargo punt service were making things difficult for him in his major enterprise, which was shipbuilding, and in 1901 he took steps to convert the cargo punt service into a limited liability company. Around the same time the Newcastle Council came to the conclusion that the punt should be run by the State Government, and soon Peter Callen was assailed by a series of complaints about his service. Chief among these dissatisfactions was the fare being charged to use the punt. In March 1901 Council sent a deputation to the Minister for Works seeking a government-run cargo service. The Newcastle Morning Herald reported it this way in their issue of March 7, 1901:

*Alderman Gilbert: ‘... at present it costs a person three shillings to get a horse and cart from Newcastle to Stockton and back; another great cause of trouble was the delay in getting backwards and forwards. In some instances a period of three hours was occupied in the undertaking. The approaches to the present punt (are) small and inadequate’.*

*Mr Smith (Williamtown) pointed out that ordinarily the punt made only 8 trips daily between 8am and 5pm and if the farmers and dairymen missed the first crossing they were placed at much inconvenience and loss.*

Callen hotly contested the criticism that he was profiteering, and there followed an exchange of acrimonious correspondence on the matter, which smouldered on and off for years. He was a feisty and combative correspondent and seemed to relish the stoush with the authorities. His responses to the Council's criticisms were often lengthy, and I think it is worth reproducing a couple of them here because their tone and content tell us much about Peter Callen himself, as well as describing some of the maritime context of his times. On March 12, 1901 Callen replied to his critics in the Newcastle Morning Herald as follows:

*In your issue of the 7th instant, I noticed where a deputation had waited on the Minister for Works for the establishment of a Government cargo punt and, strange to say, the deputation comprised those who seldom or never travel by the punt. Alderman Gilbert, I find upon making inquiries, has travelled by the punt once with his Hearse since it commenced running (some 14 years ago). And he stated that the*



Terry Callen Pic

*Peter Callen and his wife Catherine and son Terry about 1912. Callen had the first car in Stockton.*



: Newcastle Region Public Library Pic

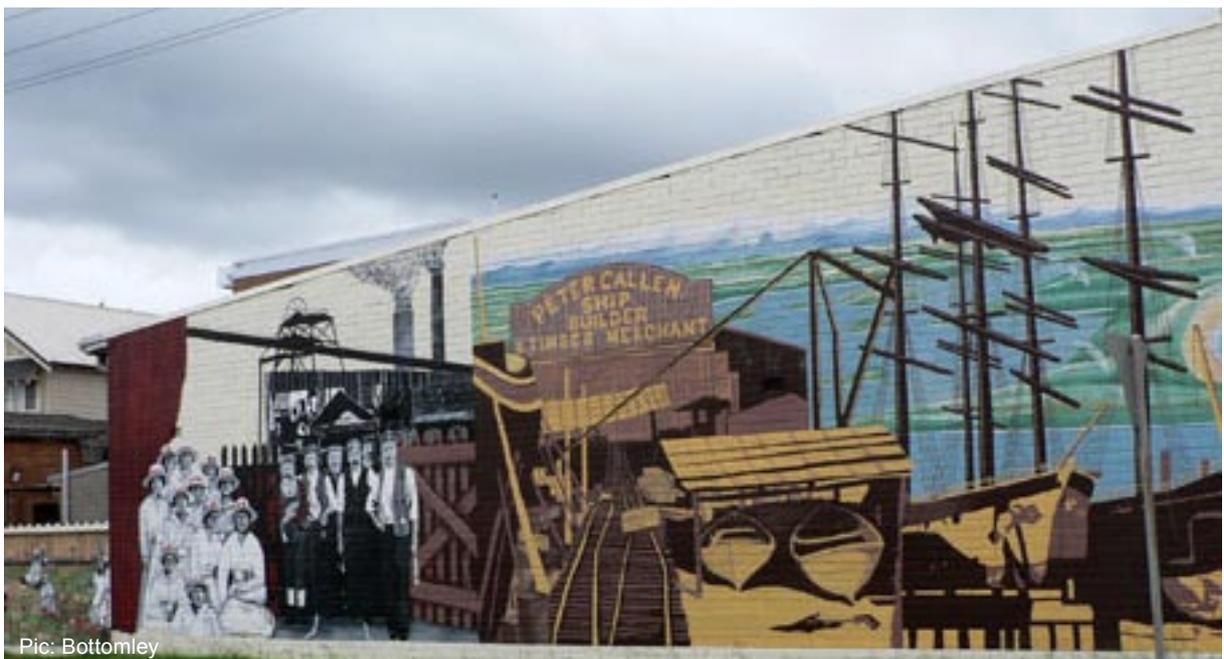
*Peter Callen & Sons shipyards in 1909, near the punt wharf site.*



Pic: Newcastle Region Public Library

*Maitland St Stockton about 1905. Peter Callen lived in the large weatherboard house on the right. (Note the lookout on top for watching shipping movements.)*

*price charged for a horse and cart to go to Stockton and back was three shillings.. Mr Smith, who travels by the punt about once a week, should have corrected him that half what he stated, viz one shilling and sixpence, was the charge and he had never paid any more. Mr Gilbert surely must have meant a dray where from 30 cwt to 2½ tons were carried, in fact, it appears as though enough cannot be piled on the unfortunate horse and in some cases, to avoid sending an additional horse, arrangements are made for another horse to meet the load after it leaves the punt and assist it to its destination. The charge for such a load up to January 1st was two shillings and sixpence return. Since the rise in the price of coal and the charge of a pound by the Government for a steamer to go to the crane and get a wagon of coal, also the rise in wages, the rates had to be increased.*



Pic: Bottomley

*Historical mural at Stockton in 2007. Note the prominence of Peter Callen and boats.*

*Mr Smith is also in error when he stated that the punt only makes 8 trips daily, for well he knows that in the week 8 trips are made before 8 a.m. and says nothing of the trips between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.*

*Alderman Gilbert is not altogether to blame seeing that he seldom travels and I consider that he must have been ill-informed. If Mr Gilbert had asked the Minister for Works to take over the Council's electric light plant and reduce the rates by half, also to give the Public a guarantee that they would have the light whenever required I consider that he would be dealing with a subject that he thoroughly understands.*

*Mr Griffiths, a man whom I have reason to believe has never travelled by the punt, said "that all that had been stated was perfectly true and as private enterprise had not met the requirements of the Public, the Government should step in and give the facilities required."*

*Mr Price stated that the traffic would be 150 carts per day. Now, I would like to know on what grounds he bases his calculations, knowing that for the past 12 months the daily average has been 15. If Mr Price reduces the rate by half, how does he make out there will be more travelling? Is it that there will be more consumed by the Public than there is at present? Does he think that horses and carts will go backwards and forwards for the sake of the ride? Does Mr Price think that if he induced the Railway Commissioners to reduce their rates by half between Newcastle and Sydney, ten times the amount of traffic would be carried?*

*The price paid to stevedores for slinging cargo in ships' holds and dumping same on the wharf, using steam winches, is 1/3d per ton. Mr Price will take a horse and dray load over to Stockton and bring the horse and cart back again for about half that amount. If the Government goes in for a punt speculation, they should also go in for stevedoring, for I am quite sure that 100 tons of cargo could be taken out of ships' holds quicker and cheaper than 30 tons could be taken to Stockton and the empty carts brought back. Mr Price's estimate of 2730 pounds per annum made up of 150 carts per day, as it must include all Sundays, Public Holidays; Good Friday and Christmas Day. Imagine 150 carts travelling on these days. Also, the procession there would be at the present wharf every morning at 9a.m. which is the busiest time. Does Mr Price propose carrying out this great scheme with one punt only, or with two, and how many crews will he require working 8 hours each and is he correct in his estimated cost of 3000 pounds? If he intends carrying it out with one punt only, how is he going to comply with the Navigation Act as regards the six months overhaul?*

*The present punt makes sufficient trips for the requirements of the trade, as many eye-witnesses will observe, as there are about six trips in the day made with an empty punt; but it is the rates where the shoe pinches. At present, those who travel by the punt pay for so doing but when we get the Government punt, those who do not travel by it will have to pay for it like the water rates --those that use the water pay and those who don't use the water have to pay. No doubt improvements could be made upon the present ferry if any inducement were held out but now that a portion of the Public think that they can get anything they ask for and throw private enterprise on the scrap heap regardless of whatever expense has incurred, I am quite willing to sell out to the public at 20% below the net cost, as stated to the deputation that waited on me. The public would then be master of the situation and make more trips at a reduced rate but I am of the opinion that the nonspeculating agitators prefer milking the State cow."*

*A week later Callen was firing more shots via the Newcastle Morning Herald: I notice a communication from Mr Gilbert in your issue of the 15th instant in reply to my letter which I stated "that what the deputation had stated to the Minister for Works*

*was not correct.' If Mr Smith and Mr. Gilbert will acknowledge what they stated was incorrect, I will then reply to his other fairy tales re the increase of 300% that someone has been whispering in his ear.*

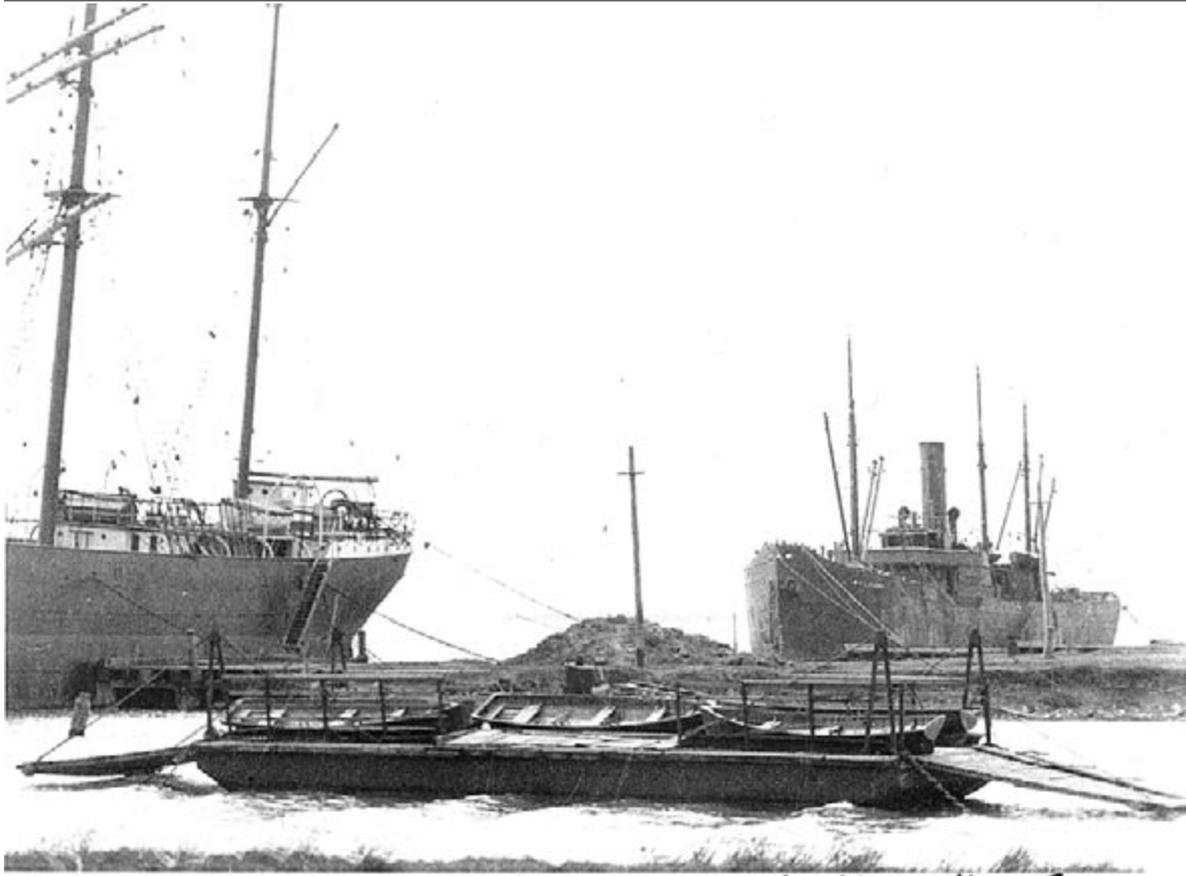
*Mr Gilbert complains of the very bad landing approach at Newcastle and suggests a tackle should be applied to lift the horses and carts off at low tide. What has he been doing all his lifetime that he has not induced the Government to construct a proper landing at Newcastle similar to that which they erected for the North Shore Ferry Co. (Sydney) about 20 years ago at a cost of 4500 pounds? The Government is now putting one down at Dawes Point for the same Company at a cost of 7500 pounds. If Mr Gilbert succeeds in getting only half that amount for Newcastle, what a splendid landing we would then have! We could then dispense with his block and tackle and there would be no time lost in waiting for the tide to rise.*

*I have put a very good landing approach at Stockton at my own expense. I have also to pay the Government a very high rent for the same. I have to pay for a Government grab-dredge to remove the silt when required. Now, why has Mr. Gilbert not done something for Newcastle all these years seeing that it has been done in Sydney? If he could use his influence as an Alderman of the second City of New South Wales and get a suitable approach and landing at Newcastle, he could then dispense with the block and tackle system at Low Tide as far as the punt is concerned. He could then remove his block and tackle down to where I am re-constructing the Queen's Wharf opposite the Railway Station and put it to use in lifting the beastly foul matter that emanates from the sewers at Low Tide, place same in a lighter and take it to sea instead of polluting the water under our wharves, the stench from which is so bad that several of my men have had to leave work, not being able to put up with this abominable stench.*

*One man had his hand poisoned and was laid up for 3 weeks and I believe if it was not for the skilful aid of the Doctor who attended him, would have lost his life and I suppose, if he had, and left a wife and large family behind him, Mr Gilbert would have placed his remains in his Hearse and taken it to its last resting place and considered he was doing one of the corporate works of mercy. There are other places along the wharf that are most abominable at Low Water, at which his block and tackle could be used to great advantage. Mr Gilbert does not seem disposed to take up any shares in the present service, notwithstanding I am offering them at 30% below cost price. He says it is too ancient and should be thrown on the scrap heap. For his information, I can assure him that it is a very strong-built punt, built for the purpose, coppered, and copper fastened and much like the late James Tyson, not much to look at but worth a lot of money, so it would be a pity to throw valuable property on the scrap heap. I am told that paint and putty sell many an old rotten cart and buggy and I can assure him that such is not the case with the punt. There is no deception; you can look at the bare wood. Owing to having but one punt, there is not time for decoration, etc. etc.*

The sniping between Callen and the authorities continued in a desultory manner for the next couple of years. Jean Purtell has extracted some relevant passages from the Newcastle Morning Herald of the time, and I think they are worth quoting as well, to give the flavour of the squabble:

*Newcastle Morning Herald, February 27 1903, p6: Messrs Peter Callen and Sons, who were at present running the punt, pointed out the disadvantages under which they labour and intimated that the Government had notified them that, in future, they would have to pay ten shillings per day for the use of the wharf on the Newcastle side. The Mayor remarked that they would see from Mr Callen's letter that matters were likely to become serious. The punt was in need of repair and he for one,*



*This picture shows an early vehicular punt on Newcastle harbour in 1910. It is not certain if it is Callen's horse punt, but if it's not, Callens' punt would have looked very similar.*

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*would not allow a horse of his to get on it at low tide. Alderman Riddell said that communications might be cut off with Stockton any moment, judging by the tone of Mr Callen's letter. Alderman Gilbert said if Mr Callen were only carrying on the punt for the benefit of the Public, it was not be expected that he would go to any expense, particularly when he knew that the people were negotiating for a more effective service.*

The dispute ground on for several more years. By 1907 the argument had become a bit like sawing sawdust:

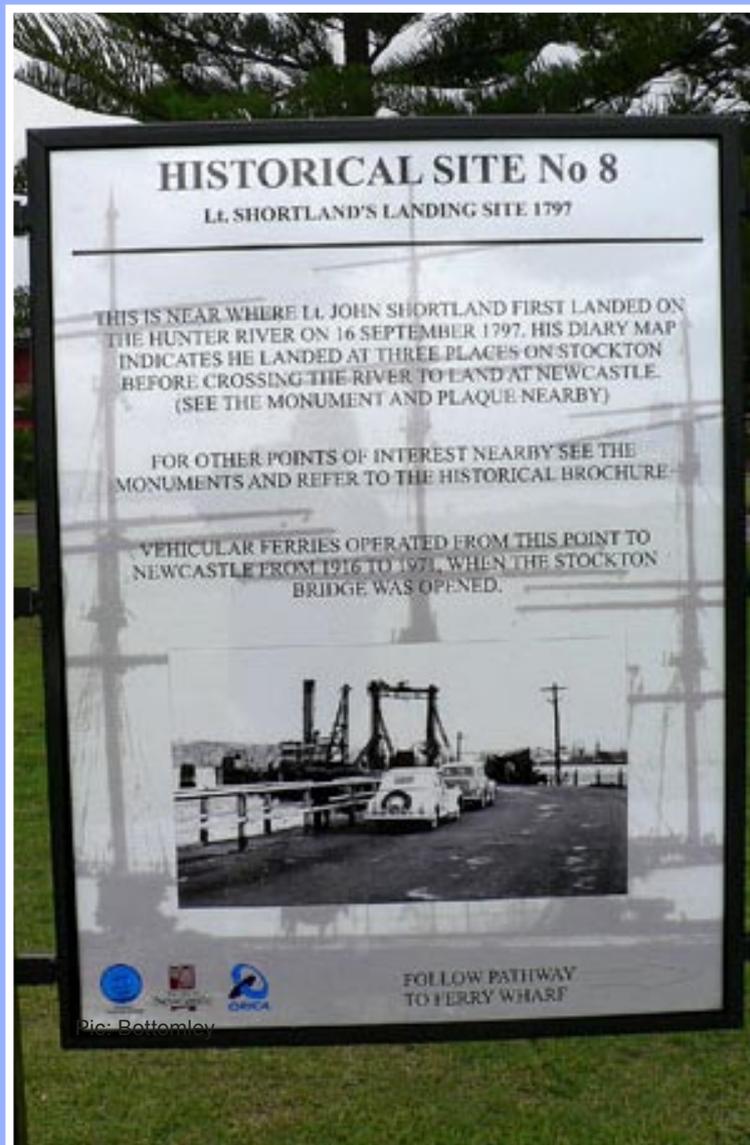
*Newcastle Morning Herald July 2 1907: Alderman Cann stated that Mr Callen had filled a public want by running the punt as long as he had, but the time had arrived that a better service should be provided. Between 126-130 vehicles were going across every week.*

And so it went on. The Council couldn't seem to get its act together to build a new bit of infrastructure (surprise, surprise!) and Peter Callen felt increasingly unappreciated and truculent. Things continued on this mutually sour and surly note for the best part of another decade, and it took until 1916 before the powers that be had finally managed to get their arse into gear. In March of that year Callen Bros were relieved of the thankless task of carrying the public and its goods across the harbour, and a brand spanking new, purpose-built, steam-powered vehicular ferry built by the Public Works Department at Walsh Island took over the service. It was called the Mildred (see next chapter).

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I wasn't able to find out what happened to Callen's punt after the Mildred was put into service. I emailed Graeme Andrews to see if he knew, and he replied: *After Mildred came on the scene I would imagine that a punt lying around would soon have found employment. It would have been pushed around the port by any small lighterage tug - coals, coke, offal, rubbish from ships, lumps of this and that that had to cross the water, etc. In the early 1890s there were probably about 80 punts ( flat topped lighters or FTL) on Port Jackson and there were certainly some in use then in Newcastle. There would have been more in the early 1900s.*

There is an article about Callen's horse punt in the July 1997 issue of the Journal of the Stockton Historical Society that says that later a similar service was operated by the government with a larger punt, but I haven't been able to find out whether that means that Peter Callen took his horse punt and went home early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving the ferrying business entirely to the government, or whether there were two services operating for a while.



*Historic site marker near the end of Punt Road, Stockton.*